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Financial Times Editorial

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Religion, tolerance and Egypt's tumult

Tensions between Muslim extremists and Egypt's Coptic Christians are not new. But since Hosni Mubarak's dictatorship was swept away by the Arab spring, sectarian relations have worsened worryingly. On Sunday, at least 24 people were killed in Cairo as security forces attacked Copts protesting about the torching of a church. Egypt's interim rulers, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, have repeatedly promised to protect the country's Christian minority. It is time they did so.

The immediate problem is the security vacuum left by the February revolution. Since then, Egypt's hated police force, widely discredited for its routine use of violence to prop up the Mubarak regime, has been partially dismantled. A purge of police thugs was unquestionably overdue. But the police's disarray is dangerous: as Sunday's appalling violence shows, the army is woefully ill-equipped to fill the gap. As soon as possible, a new police force – staffed by Copts as well as Muslims – must be built.

There are limits, however, to what even the best-run police force can achieve if the laws it enforces are discriminatory. The Scaf must also overturn the less overt, but no less pernicious forms of legally-sanctioned discrimination with which Copts routinely struggle. Two areas stand out.

Egyptian law makes it far harder for Copts to build a church than for Muslims to build a mosque. The result is that Christians despairing of being granted permission to build a place of worship apply for the right to build something else, which they then adapt into a church. Too often, the sudden appearance of unauthorised churches leads to tensions with local Muslims. The sooner such laws are removed, the better.

Second, Egypt's interim leadership must ensure that sectarian conflicts are resolved through the legal system, and that the perpetrators are appropriately punished. The old regime tended to leave local elders to deal with those responsible for violence against Copts. The result was that attacks on Christians generally went unpunished – which only fuelled sectarian tensions.

The Scaf's task will be easier if it can jump-start Egypt's ailing economy. As often as not, it is competition for scarce resources, rather than ideological difference, that sparks inter-faith conflict. Indeed, the solidarity shown by different religious groups was key to the early successes of Egypt's revolution. It would be a tragedy if that glimpse of unity were allowed to vanish for good.

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